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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MOSCOW 000339

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SUBJECT: COMMUNIST DUMA DEPUTY PREDICTS RETURN OF PUTIN
PRESIDENCY IN 2012

REF: 09 MOSCOW 2179

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Susan Elliott. Reason: 1.
4 (b), (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Communist Party (KPRF) State Duma Deputy Sergei Levchenko dismissed KPRF's recent cooperation with Solidarity at the January 30 protest in Kaliningrad as insignificant, but expressed optimism about KPRF's chances in upcoming elections due to United Russia's increasing unpopularity. On the Tandem, he claimed that Medvedev offered only lip service regarding the opposition's participation in politics. He expected the return of Vladimir Putin as president in 2012, and a quick retreat from politics for Dmitriy Medvedev. Levchenko also updated us on the political situation in Irkutsk, stating that Putin's supporters pushed to reopen the Baikalsk Pulp and Paper Mill, the Communists had a shot at winning the Irkutsk mayoral elections, and large protests over communal services tariffs had been taking place in the Irkutsk region. End Summary.

KPRF Cooperating with Solidarity

¶2. (C) During a frank February 8 discussion with Communist Party (KPRF) State Duma Deputy from Irkutsk Oblast Sergei Levchenko, we gleaned the KPRF perspective on a range of political issues. Levchenko admitted that KPRF and Solidarity cooperated during the recent protests in Kaliningrad. He stressed, however, that though the two groups share similar complaints about the government, this does not mean they are merging, as is occasionally reputed by the media. Levchenko agreed that Solidarity has potential as a political party, but thought it was poorly represented in the provinces. He does not think Solidarity has been visible enough in the run-up to the upcoming March 14 elections (NOTE: Solidarity members have not registered for any regional races. End Note). Levchenko also predicted that, due to the current economic crisis, in the upcoming March elections, KPRF would fare better than it has in the past.

Medvedev's Remarks on Opposition's Poor Visibility

¶3. (C) Levchenko told us he thought that President Medvedev's January 22 comments at the State Council regarding the opposition were just lip service. Medvedev feigned dismay over opposition parties' poor visibility and representation in the regions while half of the deputies in regional parliaments are from United Russia. Levchenko argued that Medvedev made such a statement only to please people, and that he is not serious about creating a more democratic electoral structure. Levchenko stated that Medvedev's proposal to lower the bar for earning seats in local Dumas to five percent would pass, but that the change would have little real effect. He saw the bill as window

dressings, not real political reform. In his view, "there has been a lot of talk about the democratic process, but nothing is really changing."

Putin as President, Again

14. (C) Levchenko was confident that Putin would take over the Russian presidency in 2012. He cited Putin's high approval rating and said that he is popular enough to win easily. With voters facing serious economic uncertainty, the country would look to Putin for leadership. Levchenko believes that after Putin returns as president in 2012, Medvedev will simply disappear from the public spotlight.

Latest Political Situation in Irkutsk

15. (C) Levchenko told us that Putin's decision to reopen the Baikalsk Pulp and Paper Mill is one of the top political issues in the Irkutsk oblast (Ref A). He said that Putin's supporters aggressively pushed to reopen the mill. In general, there are few organizations in the region which are fighting back, especially considering rising unemployment in the city of Baikalsk. Levchenko thought that if Putin did not reopen the mill, the unemployed would have held more public protests.

16. (C) The upcoming March 14 elections in Irkutsk City and Bratsk both promise to be serious campaigns. Current Irkutsk City mayor Vladimir Yakubovsky, in power since November 1997, decided not to participate in the elections and has already

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left the area. It is not clear, however, that the next mayor will be from United Russia. Levchenko argued that United Russia has made many mistakes that have created substantial negative feelings among residents. Levchenko is also head of the local KPRF branch in Irkutsk oblast. He thought that KPRF's Viktor Kondrashov, a successful businessman and philanthropist, had a serious chance.

17. (C) A third political issue in Irkutsk (and elsewhere in Russia) is the recent 40 percent increase in communal services tariffs, which have spurred two recent protests. Levchenko told us that on February 7, the Communist Party led a demonstration of five thousand people protesting in the city of Angarsk, 50km North West of Irkutsk City. More than 1000 people protested against these tariffs, claiming that they simply could not afford to pay their bills. Russian website grani.ru displayed photos of the protesters, wrapped in heavy fur coats, demonstrating out in the cold Siberian weather. Pensioners in the region have been especially vocal about this topic as government social payments have not risen to meet higher costs. Levchenko was clear that these protests were not aimed at greater political freedom or economic modernization; the driving force was simply an increase in tariffs past the point that residents could afford to pay.

Biographic Note

18. (C) Levchenko is rarely in Moscow -- usually only once every two months -- and often only stays in the capital for one day. He does not speak English, but is open and engaging in Russian. When we were denied access to the State Duma because his office had misfiled paperwork for our meeting, he suggested crossing the street to a cafe. Levchenko was gracious with his time and did not seem to be in any rush to return to the Duma, despite his limited time on the ground in the capital.

Comment

19. (C) Levchenko gave a unique and credible perspective on politics at both the federal and regional levels. When Putin comes to the rescue to resolve acute economic problems such as the Baikalsk Pulp and Paper Mill, it bolsters his appeal with the masses. While protests like those in the city of Angarsk highlight dissatisfaction with the government, they are largely contained and do not pose a national threat. We do, however, anticipate more protests in the coming months, especially heading into the election season and the national Day of Dissent in the end of March.

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